VIRGINIA WILDLIFE

FEBRUARY 2011 FOUR DOLLARS

Memory in Bone • Big Cats in Virginia? • Decoys as Investment

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ABOUT THE COVER: Mountain lion. Story on page 18. © Bill Lea

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BOB DUNCAN
Executive Director

As a youngster growing up in southwest Virginia, I was always fascinated by woodchucks and they played no small part in sparking my lifelong passion for wildlife. As I recall, a groundhog—actually, its skeletal remains—figured in to one of my science projects along the way. While groundhogs sparked my interest, what has sustained me during a 37-year career in wildlife management has been the absolute joy of working with folks who share that passion and a sense of calling about their chosen field.

One such group of wildlife professionals is our conservation police officers (CPOs) who, by the very nature of their jobs, serve as the front line of the agency. Recent events served to remind me just what a wide-ranging and difficult set of duties these folks have. Not only do they enforce our fishing, hunting, and boating laws, they also enforce other laws related to public safety. These men and women have the daunting responsibility of investigating boating and hunting accidents and the solemn task of informing families regarding the loss of loved ones.

Because our officers spend so much time in the woods, they are trained in tracking skills (see related story, page 14). They serve on teams that respond to wildlife crimes, search for missing persons, and assist other agencies in searches for fugitives. By their training and quick, decisive actions, our officers have saved folks from drowning or choking to death and, not surprisingly, they have been the very ones to find lost youngsters in the woods. They have deployed for hurricane duty and worked floods and other natural disasters in service to their fellow man—many times outside of our state borders.

The range of CPO activities is nothing short of remarkable. And while trained to deal with and work under a wide range of difficult field conditions, our CPOs are very much at home when teaching others about hunting and boating safety. They train hunter education instructors and they answer public inquiries about game and fish laws. CPOs help organize and conduct special events for youth, disabled sportsmen, and veterans. Our CPOs act as liaisons to other state, federal, and local law enforcement agencies where, to be sure, a special bond is formed among all who serve together. Like the risks associated with other police work, the job of a wildlife officer can be very dangerous. On rare occasions, an officer may have to take a life in self defense or sacrifice their own life in the line of duty.

So the next time you see one of these brave men or women, take time to thank them for all they do to protect the wildlife resources of our great commonwealth. They may at times have to be tougher than groundhog hide, but they have hearts of gold!

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To manage Virginia's wildlife and inland fish to maintain optimum populations of all species to serve the needs of the Commonwealth; To provide opportunity for all to enjoy wildlife, inland fish, boating and related outdoor recreation and to work diligently to safeguard the rights of the people to hunt, fish and harvest game as provided for in the Constitution of Virginia; To promote safety for persons and property in connection with boating, hunting and fishing; To provide educational outreach programs and materials that foster an awareness of and appreciation for Virginia's fish and wildlife resources, their habitats, and hunting, fishing, and boating opportunities.

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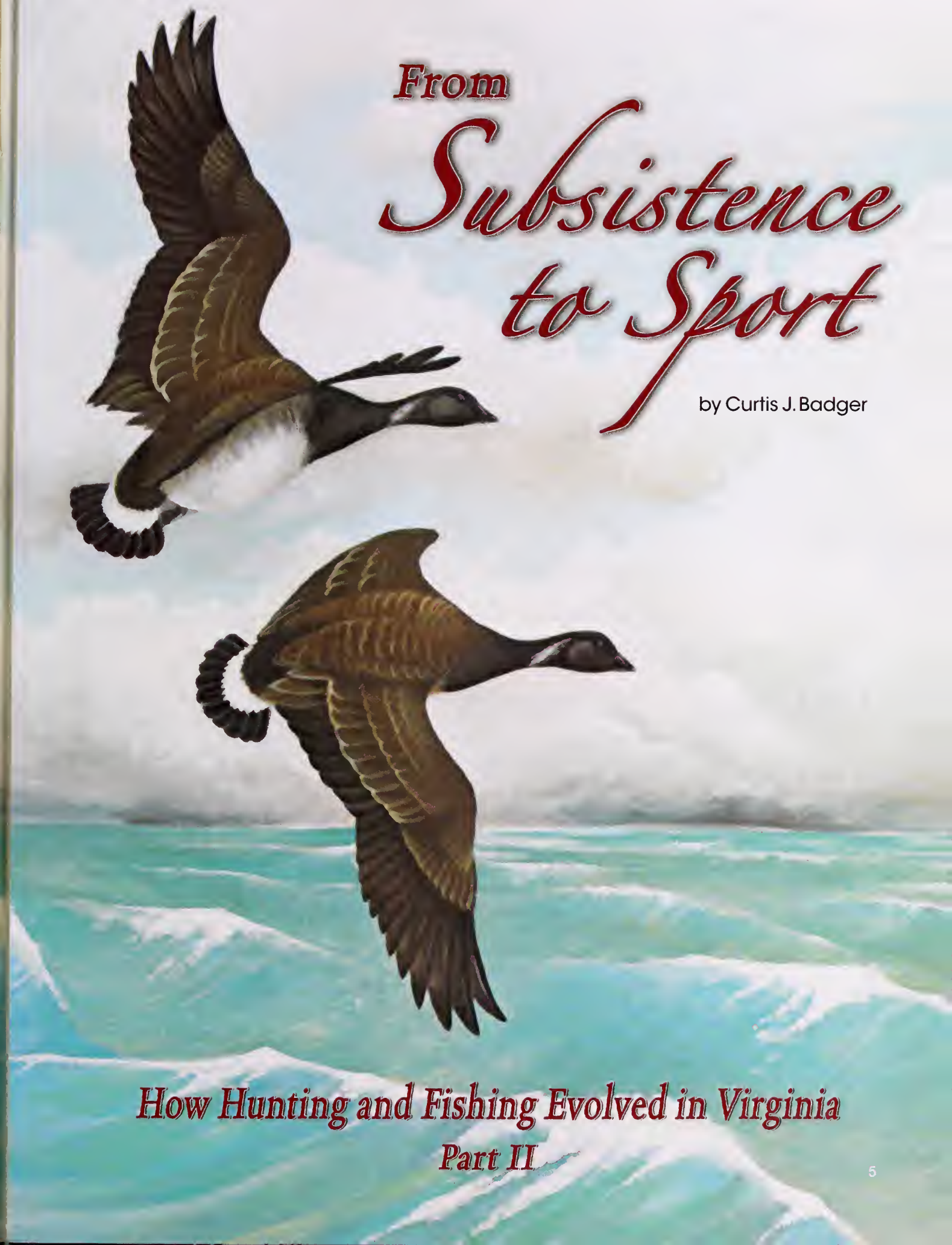


From Subsistence to Sport

by Curtis J. Badger

How Hunting and Fishing Evolved in Virginia

Part II

On December 18, 1905 Alexander Hunter was sleeping soundly in the lighthouse keeper's cottage in the village of Broadwater on Hog Island in Northampton County. Around midnight, someone began pounding on the door. It was Charles Sterling, the keeper of the light, and he wanted Hunter to come at once to the nearby lighthouse. An incredible event was taking place.

A gale had been brewing all day, so Hunter put on his oilskins and left the cottage with Sterling, both men leaning hard into the wind and sleet. They climbed the circular stairway to the keeper's room just beneath the light, and then went out onto a narrow iron balcony, icy with sleet and rain. Thousands of brant, buffeted by the storm, had been attracted to the light. Many crashed into the glass, stunned, some falling lifeless to the ground below.

"The brant, the shyest, wildest, most timid of waterfowl, were within five feet of us, but, evidently blinded by the light, they could see nothing," Hunter wrote. "Some would circle around the tower, others dart by; and wonderful to relate, some would remain stationary in the air, their wings moving so rapidly that they were blurred like a wheel in rapid motion. The lamp in the tower revolved every forty-five seconds, and for a short time every bird was in the vivid glare, which displayed every graceful curve of neck and head, and the set and balance of the body, and enabled one to look into their brilliant eyes."

Soon, many of the 100 or so people who lived on this barrier island had heard of the event, and they gathered with their dogs in the lighthouse compound, collecting dead brant and dispatching the wounded. Some men wanted access to the lighthouse balcony so they could shoot the brant, but Sterling refused. Sterling himself picked up 28 brant, Hunter wrote; the villagers, many times that number.

Hunter's account of the incident in his book *The Huntsman in the South* views the villagers with disdain, and it illustrates the gulf that had developed between people whose ancestors viewed wildlife as a means of subsistence and those who view it as sport. To Hunter the event was tragic and the villagers' actions, savage. But to the villagers it was serendipitous. Christmas was coming. There would be meat on the table for all.

As population grew along the coast, more pressure was put on what was indeed a finite natural resource. Trade was established linking rural communities dotting the Chesapeake Bay and the Eastern Shore with Baltimore, Philadelphia, Wilmington, and New York. Sailing ships and, later, steamships ferried local agricultural crops to markets, and along with the potatoes and cabbage went barrels of fish, oysters, clams, terrapins, and wild ducks. The opening of the railroad on the Eastern Shore in 1884 ushered in a new era of commerce and trade.

Commerce, trade, and seaside resorts like the Cobb's Island Hotel (L) flourished with the opening of the railroad on the Eastern Shore in 1884. Above, early illustrations of life in the bay were often based on exaggerated claims.

by W.L. Sheppard, Frank Leslie's Illustrated Journal

The railroad also provided a great boost to the hunt clubs and seaside resorts on the barrier islands. Some, such as the famous Cobb's Island resort, had been in operation for years, but the railroad made access much easier. More resorts were built and more and more people came. Sportsmen could leave Philadelphia by rail in the morning, dine on crab cakes on Cobb's Island in the evening, and be in the duck blind at dawn the next day.

The influx of city sportsmen in communities where hunting had roots in subsistence living did not always go smoothly. Hunter writes that he went to Hog Island in the early part of the season and expected fine shooting. He climbed the watchtower one evening, scanned the inlet with a scope, and said the water was black with wildfowl. Early the next morning he prepared to set out for his blind when he was told the birds had gone. A few local residents had spent the night blasting them, driving the birds away.

The term "sustainable" is widely used today in conservation circles, and in the mid- to late nineteenth century it became apparent that the natural food resources of the coast could not be sustained, given the market demand from growing East Coast cities. Maryland and Virginia passed laws regulating the seafood industry, and the last two decades of the nineteenth century saw the passage of the first game laws.

Alexander Hunter served in the Virginia legislature and proposed some of the early regulations. "Until 1878 there were no game laws in Virginia, and anyone could shoot at will all the week, and Sundays too, day or night," he wrote. Within a few years, night shooting was outlawed, spring shooting was prohibited, and wild game was given the Sabbath as a day of rest. Hunter advocated stationing a game warden on Hog Island for six months of the year.

And so our great store of fish and game had gone from becoming a matter of survival

Willet by © J. W. Taylor

Rail service on the Eastern Shore opened the door for sportsmen to travel from East Coast cities to hunt its seemingly endless supply of waterfowl.

Who was Alexander Hunter?

Alexander Hunter was born on June 4, 1843 in Norfolk and served in the Confederate Army as a member of Mosby's Ranger and in the Black Horse Cavalry. Ironically, he spent his career working for the federal government in Washington as an employee of the General Land Office. His father, Bushrod Washington Hunter, owned the plantation Abingdon in Northern Virginia, which is now part of Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. A small museum depicting life at Abingdon is housed in the Terminal A Exhibit Hall.

Despite working for 40 years in the General Land Office, Hunter was a prolific writer. He contributed to many of the outdoor journals of his day, frequently using the nom de plume Chasseur, meaning "hunter" in French. He produced three books. *The Huntsman in the South* (Neale, 1908) is a collection of hunting stories covering Virginia and North Carolina. Hunter apparently intended to publish subsequent volumes but died before he was able to do so. He also wrote two books about the Civil War: *Johnny Reb and Billy Yank,* and *The Women of the Debatable Land.*

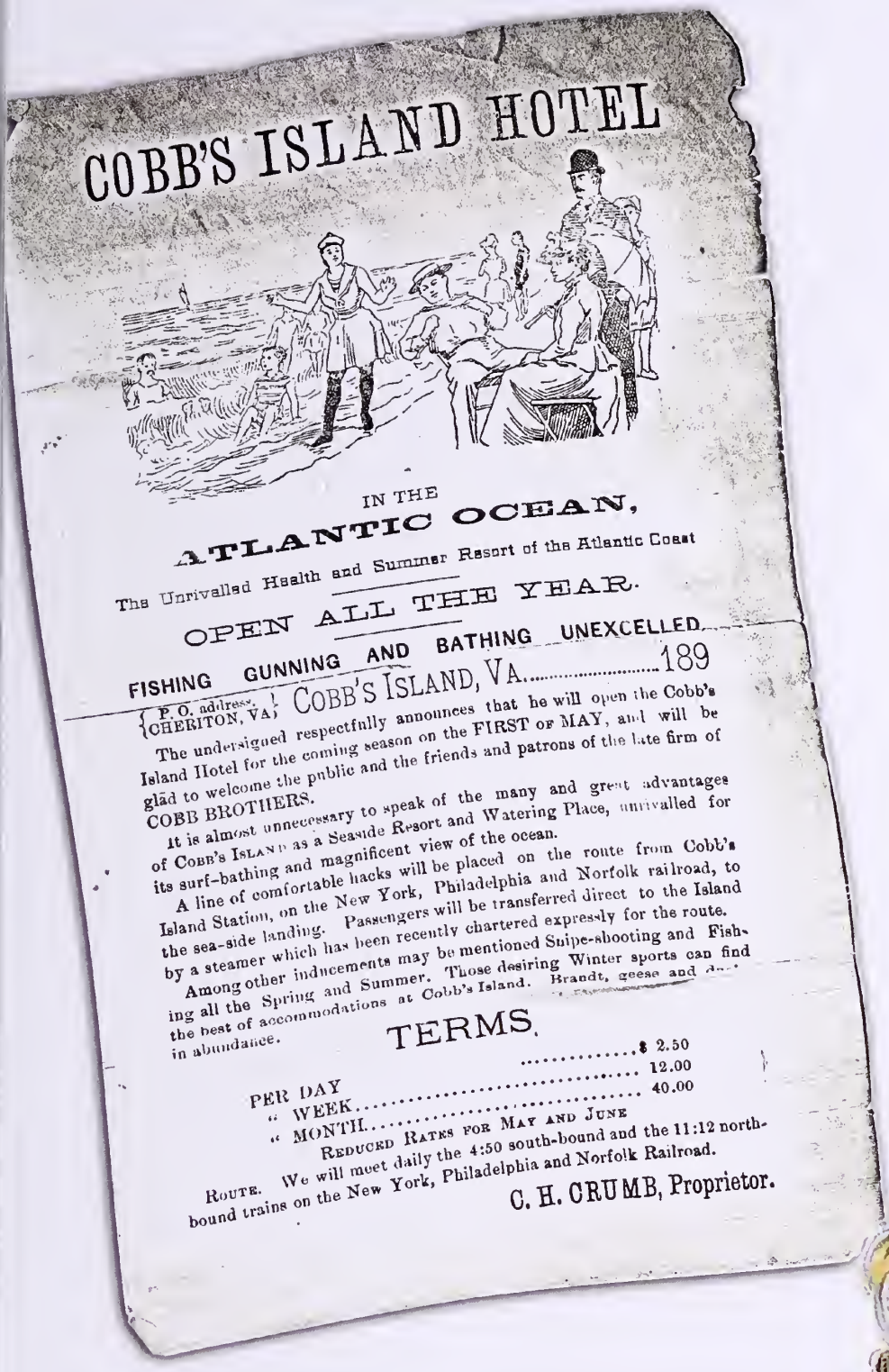
He died at age 71 in Silver Spring, Maryland, on July 2, 1914 and is buried in the Confederate section of Arlington National Cemetery.

for early colonists to a government-regulated source of sport for those with leisure time and money to spend. And rural people, such as the Broadwater residents of Hog Island, felt that they had been converted from God-fearing, law-abiding citizens to outlaws almost overnight by the passage of such laws. Hunting and fishing heretofore had been governed by natural law. Duck season began when the ducks arrived. It ended when they left.

The transition from survival to sport very likely had implications beyond the viability of the natural resource. During this period and earlier, the traditions and culture of the English were imported to America. As landowners and businessmen became prosperous, they initiated in their American homes the manners and customs of the upper classes back in England. These manners also extended to the field, where in England the hunt was a social event, a gathering of lords and ladies, and certainly not a means of putting food on the table.

In *The Huntsman in the South*, Hunter paints himself as the aristocratic, well mannered sportsman who observes a certain code of ethics that sets him apart from the common people of Broadwater, who would stoop to picking up dead brant from the base of a lighthouse to take them home for the table. We see in his writing this dichotomy of the use of natural resources. On one hand is the spirit of going gunning, of indiscriminately providing food without ceremony or manners, and on the other hand is hunting as sport and, with it, the rites and rituals attendant to people who have manners, who abide by a shared code of ethics. It is unsporting and unethical, for example, to shoot waterfowl at night, to attract them with bait, to trap them, or to kill large numbers with big bore weapons. For those whose culture equates waterfowl with feeding the family, however, this set of manners—this code—has no currency.

Of course, the passage of hunting and fishing regulations was not simply a means of enforcing manners. The day of killing ducks to feed the family had long passed, and for many rural coastal families, waterfowl represented one more commodity to ship to city markets with an invoice attached. As a result, many species of birds and fish were being over-exploited, sometimes to the point that populations were endangered. It was legal to sell ducks on the open market in those days, and barrels of them would be placed on steamships or in railroad cars for shipment to market. Spring shorebird hunting was not only legal, but was widely publicized and advertized in sporting journals of the day. We read about the incredible migratory journey of whimbrels (*Virginia Wildlife*, August



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2010) and marvel at the accomplishment, but we realize that a century ago those same whimbrels would have been legal game as they headed to nesting grounds in the Arctic.

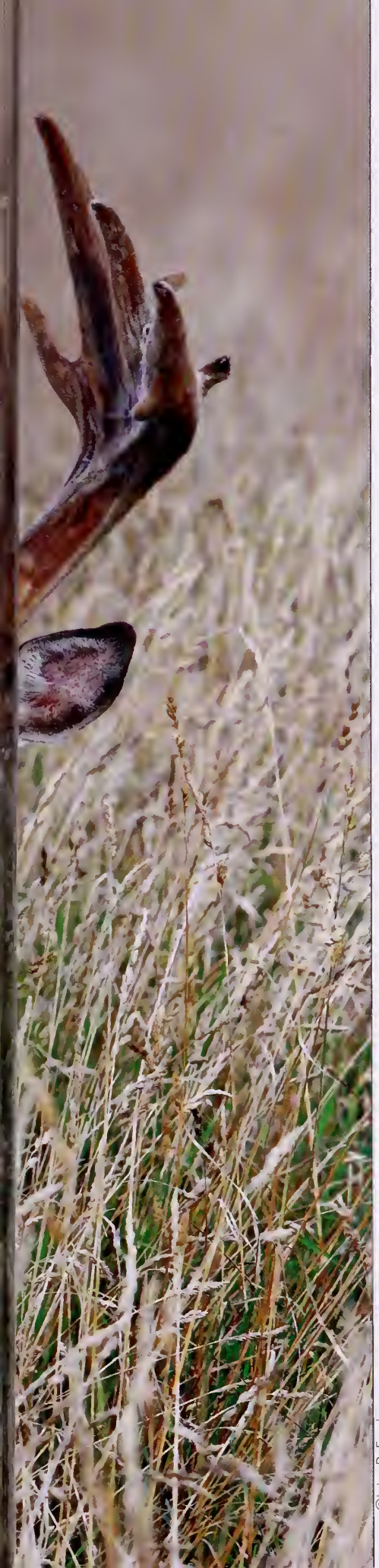
In the 1700s, slaves in coastal communities were fed so much terrapin that they protested. But in the late 1800s, terrapin stew became a fad in city restaurants, and the population of diamondback terrapins was nearly wiped out. In 1891, 89,150 pounds of terrapin were caught in the Chesapeake Bay to feed the demand for terrapin stew. The demand lasted as long as the terrapins did. In 1920, the catch was down to a mere 823 pounds and the diamondback was in danger of being extinguished. In 1929, laws were passed to protect the terrapin that still are on the books today.

Perhaps the most egregious example of exploitation was plume hunting, where birds would be killed so their feathers could adorn the hats of fashionable men and women. In 1886, while walking the streets of Manhattan, ornithologist Frank Chapman of the American Museum of Natural History performed a bird count in the busiest part of New York City. Over a two-day period he saw 40 species, including cedar waxwings, bobwhite quail, northern flicker, snow buntings, and Northern orioles. Sadly, the birds were not flitting about in trees and shrubs. They were mounted in women's hats. □

Curtis Badger, whose most recent book is A Natural History of Quiet Waters *(UVA Press), has written widely about natural history and wildlife art. He lives on Virginia's Eastern Shore.*

Those with money and leisure time enjoyed the best of accommodations in high fashion. Untold numbers of birds were taken simply for use of their feathers to adorn women's hats.

MEMORY IN BONE



©John R. Ford

Research on antler development reveals clues about far more than genetics.

by Jason E. Davis

Head low to the ground, a young buck steps slowly through the deep green shadows of the late summer forest. On the opposite hill a dry branch snaps with a sound like a gunshot. Startled, the buck looks up, catching the velvet spike of his left antler in an old deadfall. The jagged wood punches deeply into the soft tissue and he pulls away with a stinging, bloody gash.

Though the damaged antler and its matching one will be dropped by mid-winter, when the buck's new antlers grow next year they will sport impressive evidence of this careless moment. His left antler will likely have a large and uneven tine growing from the site where his old wound would have been. Even more strangely, though last year's right antler was uninjured, his new right antler will probably grow a new tine opposite the position where his old left antler was pierced. These anomalies may fade over successive years, but it's likely that each new set of antlers will always show some evidence of his old injury.

How can antlers, which are shed each year and grow back seemingly from scratch, be changed by an injury that happened years earlier? And why is an injury to one antler perfectly reflected on the opposite side of the head?

Antlers are far more than simple branches of bone. They are the only mammalian appendages able to completely regenerate, and they're some of the fastest developing bony tissues on earth—growing up to half an inch per day at their peak. And antlers greatly influence a buck's love life. Bucks with large, symmetrical racks are more likely to father large numbers of offspring than bucks sporting puny or weird-looking sets.

Each year a new set of antlers begins as stem cells growing inside the stubby pedicles, or buttons, on top of a buck's skull. As these stem cells grow and divide, they develop into a complex structure made of interwoven layers of cartilage and bone, along with an intricate network of blood vessels and nerves. While it grows, the antler is covered in a layer of sensitive, finely furred skin, called velvet. When the antler matures this velvet sloughs off, leaving a strong but flexible bone-like antler beneath.

In white-tailed deer, only males normally grow antlers. Bucks begin growing them after reaching puberty, when their testosterone levels rise to adult levels. In adult bucks, testosterone increases in the spring—as the days grow longer—and new antlers begin to develop. A second, somewhat smaller surge of testosterone comes in autumn, causing the antlers to finish hardening and shed their velvet lining. Testosterone drops precipitously in late winter, causing the antlers to fall off, and the whole process starts again.

Once in every few thousand cases a doe may grow antlers, but this only happens if she has a tumor or other disorder that causes extra-high production of testosterone. Because these does don't produce the correct patterns of testosterone in connection with season and day length, they usually never shed their velvet. Instead, their antlers may grow all winter and even into the spring of the next year, and in some cases they may never be shed.

©Bill Lea

In rare cases, a doe will grow antlers.

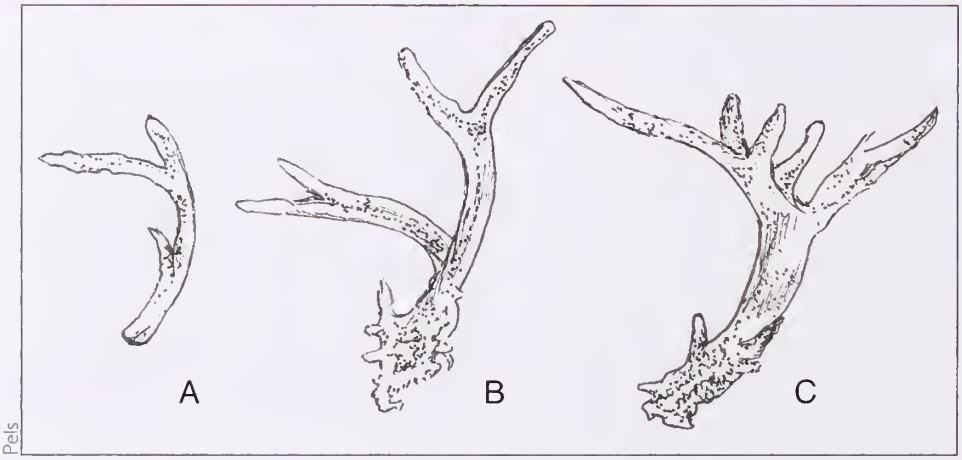
©Bill Lea

Just like the branches of a tree, every antler is a unique structure with a distinct pattern. Recent studies show that an antler's shape is due to more than just genetics; it is also influenced by the environment and the experiences of the deer itself. If a buck has low social standing, he is more likely to have small antlers, and bucks that live in pine forests are more likely to have small antlers than are bucks living in hardwood forests. Researchers speculate this has to do with poor nutrition and/or lack of undergrowth in pine forests (contact promotes growth).

The growth of antlers is a race between cartilage and bone; the more quickly the cartilage grows, the bigger and more complex the antlers will be. This race is governed in part by the mix of hormones in a buck's bloodstream. Higher testosterone during the spring may lead to slower bone transformation and bigger, more elaborate antlers.

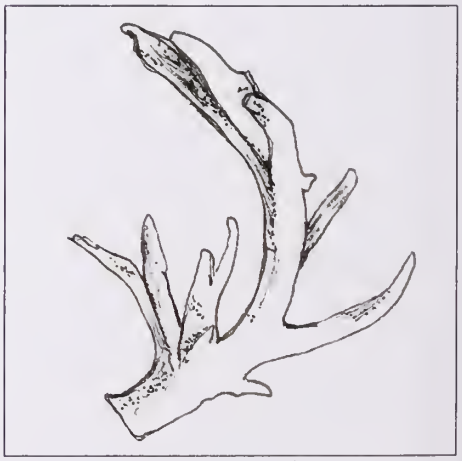
If a buck is castrated while he's still in velvet, his testosterone levels will drop immediately and he won't produce the fall surge that sheds the velvet. In this case, the cartilage in his antlers keep growing and growing, but it develops fistfuls of knobs and lumps instead of smooth branches. Sometimes bucks with this condition are called "cactus bucks" for the uneven, almost prickly, shape of their antlers. However, if a buck is castrated after he's already had his normal fall testosterone surge and shed his velvet, he'll drop his antlers within a few weeks.

New research reveals that antler shape also has a relationship with the brain. Nerves in the antlers send signals that stimulate the growth of nerves in the brain. Over time, this stimulation forms a template for the antler's



Pels

Top, an injury resulting in the loss of one eye led to irregular antler development in this buck. Drawings show how an injury to an antler affected growth over subsequent years.



Here, 2 years after an injury the antler exhibits an unusual growth pattern.

Pels

A buck castrated while in velvet will lose his ability to shed the velvet and, instead, grow cartilage full of knobs and lumps.

shape. Even after the antlers have been shed, this "nerve template" remains.

When a buck begins to grow antlers again, the brain sends out signals directing the growth of blood vessels and nerves, which can speed up or slow down the growth of cartilage in different parts of the antler. The directions that the brain sends to the growing antler tissue are based on the template that was created in the previous year, meaning that the shape of the new antlers is framed on the shape of the old antlers. Antlers grow larger and more complex as a deer ages, but the basic framework from earlier years is always retained.

The interaction between antler and brain means that an injury to the velvet can lead to a dramatic change in the antler itself. When an antler is hurt, as in the case of our young buck startled by the breaking branch, the nerves send out more signals, leading the brain to make a stronger impression of the hurt area. The following spring, when the brain begins to direct the growth of tissue, it seeks to match the strong impression left in the template by that old injury, so it mistakenly causes increased growth at the injured spot that often leads to a new point.

Even more amazing is how a wound on one antler can cause a new tine on the other antler. This occurs because the brain is predisposed to symmetry. If an injury leaves a deep imprint on one side of the brain, the other side will develop a matching imprint. This means that, in the next season, a buck will more likely than not develop new growth on both antlers.

©Bill Lea

This image demonstrates what can happen as a buck matures. In this case, an early injury stunted growth of the left antler and delayed the velvet from shedding.

This can lead to some very weird but very interesting antlers. In one study, researchers implanted a pacemaker at the base of the right antler in a late fall buck. The pacemaker sent out constant, mild pulses of electricity, stimulating the nerves in the right antler and making them send an unusually strong message to the buck's brain. The next year that buck's new right antler grew spiraled and twisted, and so did his left antler, even though the pacemaker only sent signals from the right side.

Antlers, then, are links to a buck's past and to his future. They're the physical evidence of his status, his health, his history. They're the product of an intricate interweaving of physiology and environment, and they're absolutely amazing. □

Jason Davis is an assistant professor of biology at Radford University. His research focuses on physiological processes in wild animals.

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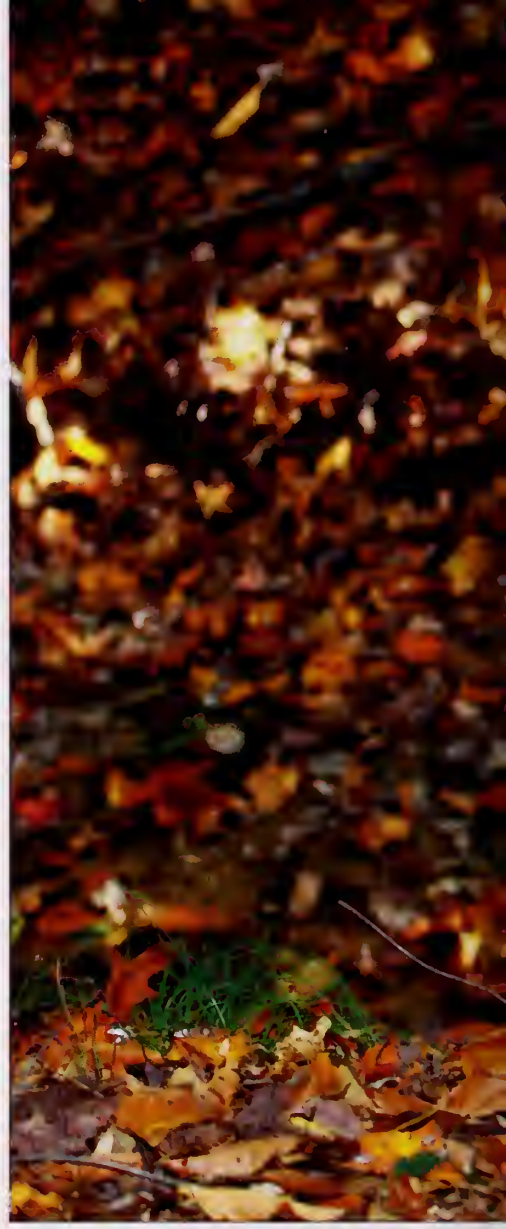
Learning the Skills to Survive

A professional tracker shares some rules for hunters to live by.

story and photos ◆ by Gail Brown



"There are people who would have you think tracking is something mystical. It's not," states Roy Hutchinson, survival skills specialist and member of the International Society of Professional Trackers (ISPT). "It is a learned set of skills that can be taught to anyone. That said, I've never met a great tracker who lived in a box. A great tracker has a thirst for mystery. Every tracking adventure is a mystery to be solved, a classic 'who done it' with a constantly changing set of variables."

Here, something hit the ground with enough force to dislodge the ground cover from its natural place. Displaced vegetation is a sign of passage.

Hutchinson, whose experience includes over 14 years working with search and rescue teams and a lifetime of experiences reading sign in challenging environments, instructs law enforcement in tracking and survival skills and is also a volunteer instructor for the Department. Those who attend his classes will find him humorous, knowledgeable, and more than serious about helping others master the skills needed to stay in control and return safely from their outdoor adventures. Before leaving class, participants will better appreciate the need to attend to details, the necessity of building confidence through experience, and the value of its counterweight—caution. Hutchinson will share some rules to live by: "Never leave your pack. Believe it can happen to you. Learn map and compass skills so you won't get lost. Or learn survival skills; you're going to need them."

Lamar Hines, owner of Hines Drywall, Inc., father and lifelong hunter, appreciates the importance of mastering survival skills, even though he's learned some lessons the hard way. A skilled tracker, Hines wants his son to have the same kind of childhood he had, the same opportunities to hunt and roam the woods. Hines is proud of the success he's had learning to track, building on skills begun at the age of three when he first followed his dad into the woods of Amelia County. Yet, seeing the blood-trails that his father could easily follow was a challenge, one better understood when he learned he was color blind. It was a condition that would impact his hunting experiences for the rest of his life, albeit not in the way he thought at the time. By age nine, Hines had adjusted and taught himself to look carefully for different kinds of clues. While he didn't know it then, a life-long love affair with tracking had begun.

"I found out as a young boy I can't see shades of color," says Hines. "When tracking, unless there's a lot of blood, I just can't see it. All shades look the same to me. In order to track an animal, I get down on the ground and look carefully for other things, things that are different: a twig broken, something out of place, or missing, or even something found where it shouldn't be." Tracking is

Lamar Hines is teaching his son, Hayden, to track. He wants his son to have the same experiences he had growing up hunting in Virginia.

Wilderness Discovery

SURVIVAL TIPS

1. Never leave your pack
2. Manage personal resources (shelter, water, heat)
3. Conserve energy (energy = heat)
4. Know how to use a map and compass
5. Know how to use your gear and practice often
6. Know your limits and don't exceed them
7. Know it can happen to you; prevent it
8. Keep a positive attitude
9. Eat and drink only what you bring

what Hines considers the heart of the hunting experience. It's a mystery to him why any hunter wouldn't take the time to learn to track. But then, he figures, each person decides for himself what he wants from his experiences in the woods. "I can't tell you how many deer I've found that people had given up on. They get ahead of themselves, kicking up leaves and walking through tracks, not noticing where they're stepping. They miss things."

"In order to see more, and see differently, you need to spend more time really looking," states Hutchinson. "Finding and interpreting signs of passage have to do with first locating the evidence that something has traveled where you are looking, and then determining what made the sign. It's intuitive, a marriage of art and science. Tracking is also a great teacher of humility. The more you learn, the more you realize how much you don't know. A good tracker realizes he will never be an expert, and is always willing to say 'I don't know'. But by looking carefully, the signs you uncover will tell the story of what occurred in a given area. For law enforcement, that's called evidence.

Finding and interpreting signs of passage have to do with first locating the evidence that something has traveled where you are looking, and then determining what made the sign. It's intuitive, a marriage of art and science.

For a hunter, this could tell him why, and better yet when, the animals use an area. There's very little sense in putting your stand over a deer trail that's used only at night."

Solving the how and the why, unraveling the mystery, is the part of hunting that Hines loves best. Over the years Hines also developed a healthy respect for survival skills, although his enthusiasm and confidence often trumped discretion in the past. When shown Hutchinson's list of survival strategies and asked to comment on what guidelines he might need to brush up on, Hines glanced down the list and tapped number 6. "That one," admits Hines. "I'm so comfortable in the woods I've made mistakes thinking I can do more than I can." Number 6 says it clearly: "Know your limits and don't exceed them." But Hines did exceed them one cold winter day—a perfect day to hunt, track, and learn his limits the hard way.

"We'd been invited to hunt on private land along the Appomattox. The owner had 35 DCAP Stamps; we were given 15. It was a clear winter day, just made for hunting and tracking; everything was perfect." And all did go right, until that night when Hines tried to help a friend retrieve his dogs. "We'd gotten all but one, Star. We could hear her, and see her, across the river in the beam of our headlamps. She must have fallen down the embankment because she was in a spot where she couldn't exit to either side and she couldn't climb back up the hill. You could see she was hurt and scared."

Hines readily admits he should have walked back for his waders, even wishes he had, but it was late and he was tired and, in the end, when confidence and caution collided, he took off his new boots and waded out into the river, making his second serious mistake that night.

"The air temperature was about 30° F, no more than 40° F in the water. Where I entered the river it wasn't too deep, not even waist high, and only 25–30 feet wide. When I got to the other side it was much deeper; I couldn't get to her. I had to climb up, then down the embankment, get the dog, and carry her out the same way. I cut my feet up something terrible. By the time I was half way back across the river, I knew I was in trouble. My body wasn't cold because I was wearing Gore-Tex, but I couldn't feel my feet. I'd seen a friend in a similar situation… same freezing water. It was dark; he got fooled by the branches and leaves along the bank and, thinking he was on solid land, stepped off into deep water. He would have been in serious trouble if we hadn't been there to help."

"Getting wet in the cold can be a death sentence," Hutchinson cautions. "Hypothermia can set in quickly and you lose your ability to reason. In one [rescue] case I was involved in, the person had everything needed to survive the night right there with him in his pack. He had fallen, broken his leg, and no doubt panicked. We all need to learn it's okay to be afraid, but that running into the woods won't get us to safety. He wouldn't have been comfortable, and no doubt he was in pain, but he was still safer where he was. Unfortunately, he left his pack, maybe thinking he could move faster without it, and managed to crawl about 400 yards. There's a condition called paradoxical undressing. This occurs when a person, under moderate to severe hypothermia, gets disorientated and discards his clothes. This condition causes a hormonal release that makes your brain believe you are warm. People have been known to take off their clothes, fold them neatly, and leave them on the path before walking off to no good end. This man did the same."

DGIF instructor Roy Hutchinson and Outdoor Education staff Jimmy Mootz and Karen Holson prepare for the Map and Compass/GPS Navigation class for upcoming educational events.

Hutchinson offers an anachronism to help people stay alive: S.T.O.P.—Stop-Think-Observe-Plan. And that's one thing he wants people to learn in his classes. "Whether you are cold, or lost, or both, you need to teach yourself to look around, use all your senses, assess your situation, and make a plan. You can manage panic with a plan. And a plan helps you keep a positive attitude, which makes all the difference."

And Hines?

"I lost all sense of feeling in my feet, and then warmed them up too quickly. The pain was terrible, but I was lucky. In the end, I didn't suffer any permanent tissue damage." Hines paid a price, however, and he pays it over and over every winter. "I never used to get cold; it's just the way I'd always been. But now my feet get cold right away. I regret that. I'd still never leave a dog, but I'm much more attentive to safety details, especially now that I'm teaching my son to hunt and track. I want him to stay safe; he can learn that. And he'll never forget the things he sees and learns in the woods. They'll stick to his brain like glue. He'll look at all things differently."

Hutchinson couldn't agree more. □

Gail Brown is a retired teacher and school administrator.

Left, a sign of passage is created when material is transferred from one area to a place that it is not normally seen. Right, careful observation, knowledge of weather conditions, use of an index print for comparison, and logic all help the tracker determine time of passage.

Scientists consider the claims... and the evidence.

Big Cats in Virginia

by David Kocka
and Dr. Bill McShea

It can happen anywhere—at a sportsmen's show, next to the coffee urn at the local convenience store, or in church on Sunday morning. As soon as you are pegged as a wildlife biologist someone will ask you about the rumor circulating of a mountain lion in the area. In recent years this has become a weekly, if not daily, event. Access to the Internet and oversaturation of information through cell phones, blackberrys, and the like adds to the frenzy. More and more images appear as photo attachments to emails claiming to have been taken in Virginia. With some detective work, they are often debunked as pictures from a western state that are now making the Internet circuit, maybe even more than once. Thankfully, there are websites such as snopes.com that assist us in bringing the facts to light.

But what do we know about mountain lions (aka. cougars, panthers, pumas, catamounts) in Virginia? As reported in our 1991 publication, *Virginia's Endangered Species* (McDonald & Woodward publishing Co.), mountain lions existed statewide at the time of European settlement but presumably were extirpated from Virginia by the

The Facts Ain't Lion

1880s. According to Handley and Patton's *Wild Mammals of Virginia,* published in 1947, the last Virginia mountain lion was killed in Washington County in 1882. The authors further stated that "reported" sightings in the early 20th century "must be looked at with considerable skepticism."

Several researchers point to an increase in sightings in the 1970s as possible evidence that lions existed in Virginia at that time. Robert Downing, now a retired biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, spent five years snow tracking along the Blue Ridge Parkway and within various areas on U.S. Forest Service lands in Virginia looking for evidence of lions. At the end of that period he reported that "no indisputable sign of cougars was found."

But that was 40 years ago. Are mountain lions here in the commonwealth today? What about all of the "sightings" that get reported to the Department (DGIF) either directly or indirectly? Let us start by looking at the current, reported range of big cats in the contiguous 48 states and then look more specifically at Virginia.

The September 2009 issue of *National Geographic* identifies the current, established range of cougars. These published maps are based upon confirmed photographs, carcasses, or paw prints. Except for the Florida panther, the closest confirmed wild cougars appear to be in Michigan, Wisconsin, Arkansas, and western Louisiana. The cats do appear to be expanding their range eastward in recent decades. With deer herds at record levels in the East, the prey base is certainly present for mountain lions. Could these lions tolerate the dense human populations of the East? This remains to be seen, but they do quite well in the suburbs of Colorado and California.

Remember, sightings by themselves are not evidence! Harley Shaw, a retired mountain lion biologist who spent decades studying the big cats for the Arizona Department of Game and Fish is quoted as saying, "After years of chasing UFOs—unidentified *furry* objects—I now discount out-of-hand any sightings of lions, even from professional biologists. The human mind is a strange and wonderful thing, and it's totally unreliable."

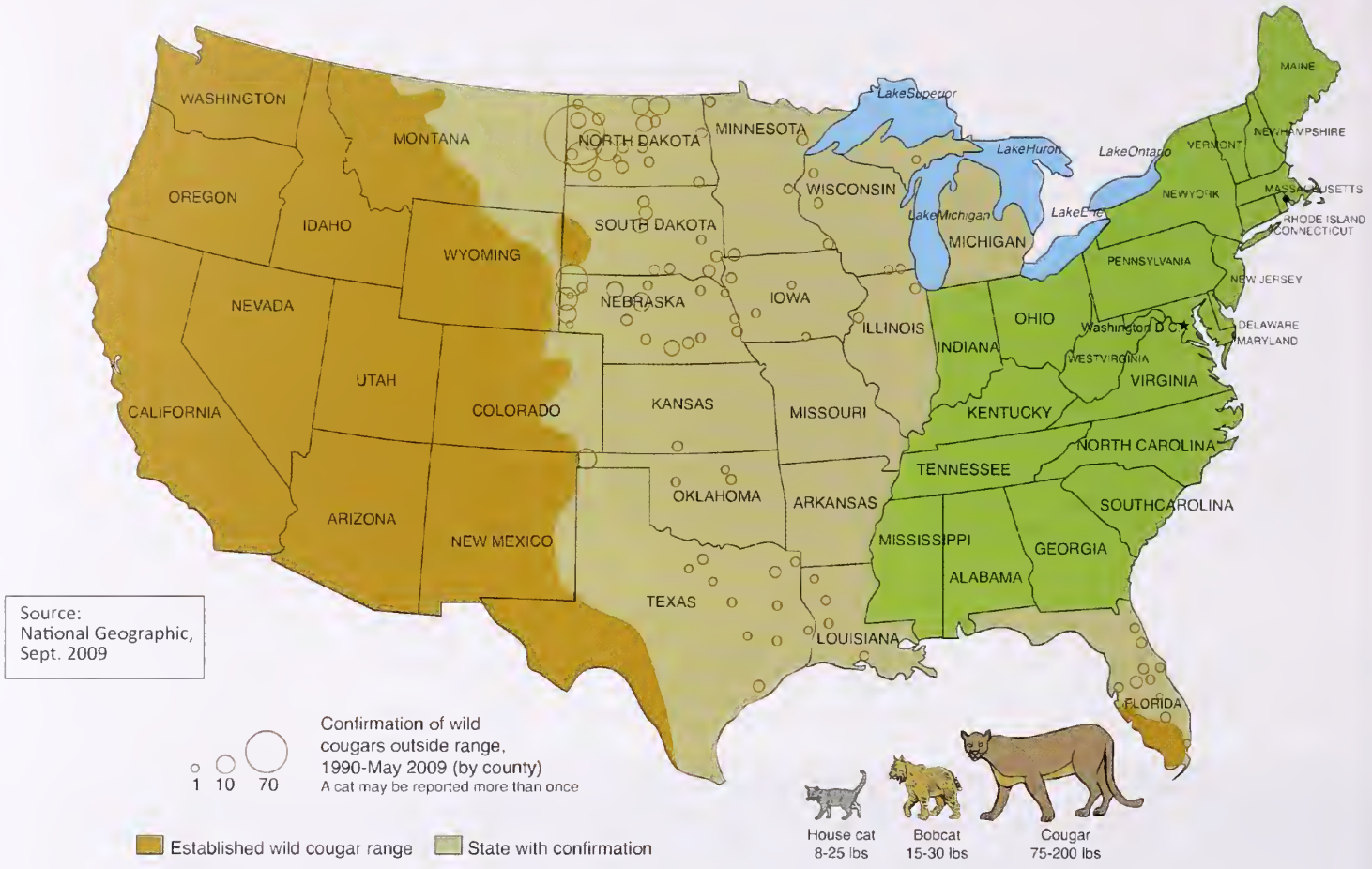
The Department's information would seem to support the range map created by the National Geographic Society.

Calls to the DGIF have averaged approximately two sightings of large cats a month in recent years. To date, none of these reports has been substantiated by a photograph, a carcass, or a track. When we reviewed these reports, we found that as many as 25 percent are of a large *black* cat. Importantly, there is no reported melanistic phase of cougars or pumas in the literature. Jaguars are known to have a black phase, but their range did not extend any farther north than Central America. In those few instances where the information appears credible, investigation by staff has always confirmed the animal to be a bobcat, black bear, domestic cat, or dog.

What other data exist to support, or refute, the existence of lions in Virginia? First, it is commonly known that in the western U.S. where mountain lions are hunted, they are often pursued by hounds, because they are known for "treeing" relatively easily during such a chase. Estimates of as many as 70,000 hunters in Virginia use hounds to chase black bears, raccoons, bobcats, and foxes. During the various hunting seasons that exist across many months throughout the year, mountain lions have never been treed.

©Bill Lea

Mountain lions are considerably larger than a bobcat and can reach up to 200 lbs. at maturity.



Each year bowhunters in Virginia are surveyed to report on the various species of animals they observe during their trips afield. Monitoring wildlife populations with archery hunter observation data is a tool used by many states and provides a reliable index to population trends. During 2008, over 20,282 hours were logged by 374 bowhunters throughout Virginia. No big cats have been reported on any of these annual surveys, which have taken place since 1997. If a large cat was observed, it would still have to be confirmed by an attendant photograph, carcass, or track of the animal.

A common technique for documenting elusive species is the use of trail cameras. Each year more sportsmen and non-sportsmen alike use these cameras to document the critters inhabiting the backyard as well as the deep woods. Despite its growing popularity, not one trail camera has documented a wild cat in Virginia, with the exception of the native bobcat.

From 1997–2001, Shenandoah National Park personnel also utilized numerous

With some detective work, images of cougars are often debunked as pictures from a western state that are now making the Internet circuit, maybe even more than once.

trail cameras, which had been baited with deer carcasses in an effort to document the presence of coyotes. Hundreds of pictures were obtained of black bears, bobcats, and raccoons, as well as some coyotes, but no big cats.

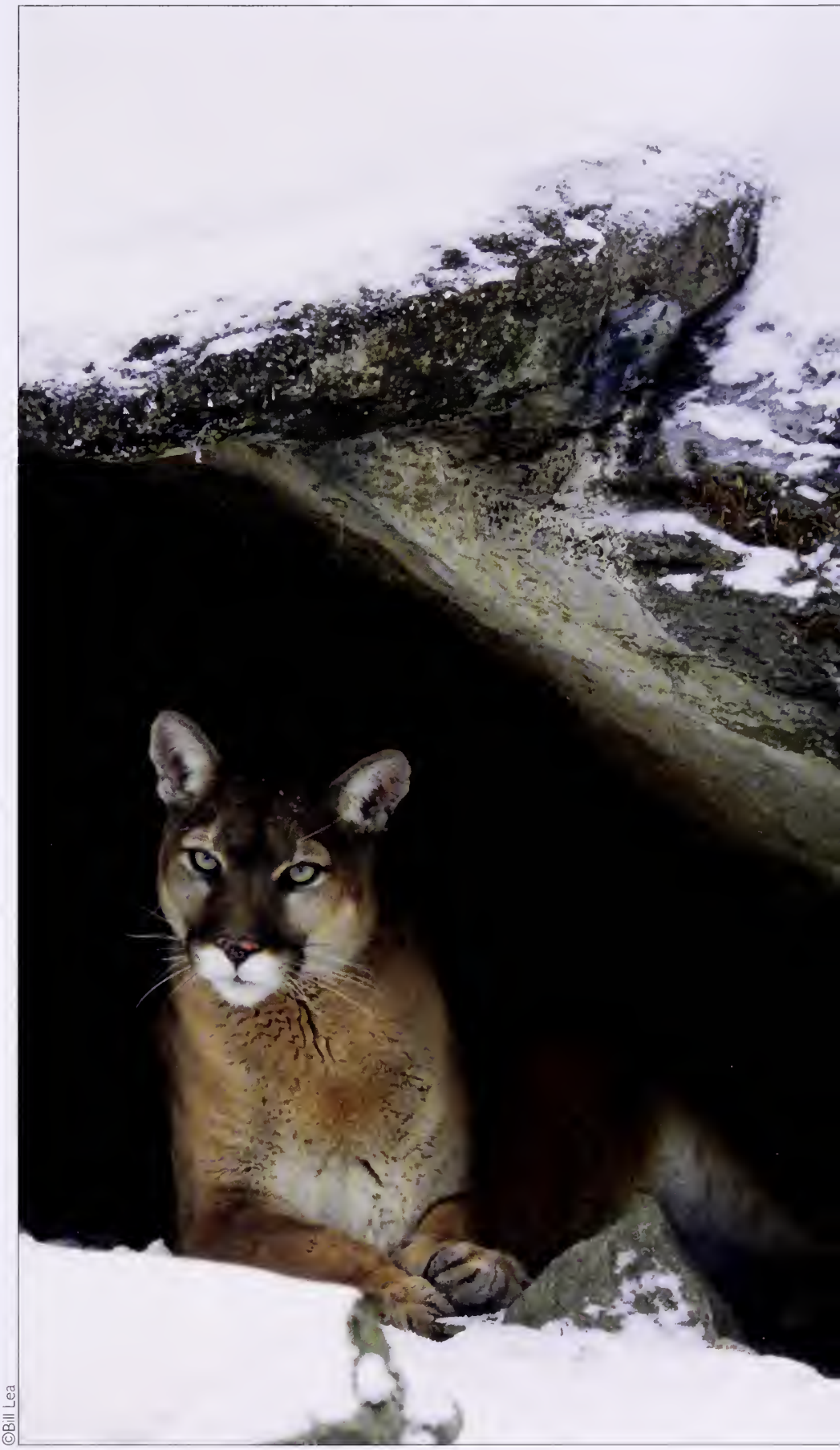
Furthermore, from 2007 through 2009 one of the authors (Dr. Bill McShea) made use of volunteers with trail cameras along the Appalachian Trail from North Carolina through Pennsylvania, in an effort to document species in some of the more remote areas of these states. Eighty percent of the sampling occurred in Virginia. Volunteers sampled 575 locations near the trail, including over 150 points in Shenandoah National Park (a total sampling effort of over 16,000 trap nights). Again, they obtained pictures of black bears (430), bobcats (57), coyotes (89), red foxes (59), and gray foxes (48), but no cougars. If there is a small population of mountain lions residing within their survey area, yet not detectable at that level of pursuit, the population would probably not be viable.

Could mountain lions held in captivity have escaped and be establishing a population in Virginia? This would also appear unlikely, as during the few instances in recent years when this has occurred the cats were so accustomed to people that they were often found short distances away, instead of in some remote wilderness.

The bottom line: The DGIF and the National Geographic Society do not believe that mountain lions currently exist in the commonwealth. But mountain lions do appear to be colonizing some of their former range by expanding eastward. If they move this far, could they become established here over time? The answer will depend upon their ability to adapt to a state with over seven million human inhabitants. The prey base is waiting for them, as well as many dichard fans of these elusive creatures. □

David Kocka, District Biologist
Virginia Dept. of Game and Inland Fisheries
517 Lee Hwy., Verona, VA 24482
(540) 248-9360
David. Kocka@dgif.virginia.gov

William J. McShea, Wildlife Ecologist
Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute
Conservation Ecology Center
National Zoological Park
1500 Remount Rd., Front Royal, VA 22630
(540) 635-6563
McSheaW@si.edu



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Mountain

Wayne Riner with his trusted camera in the mountains of Dickenson County.

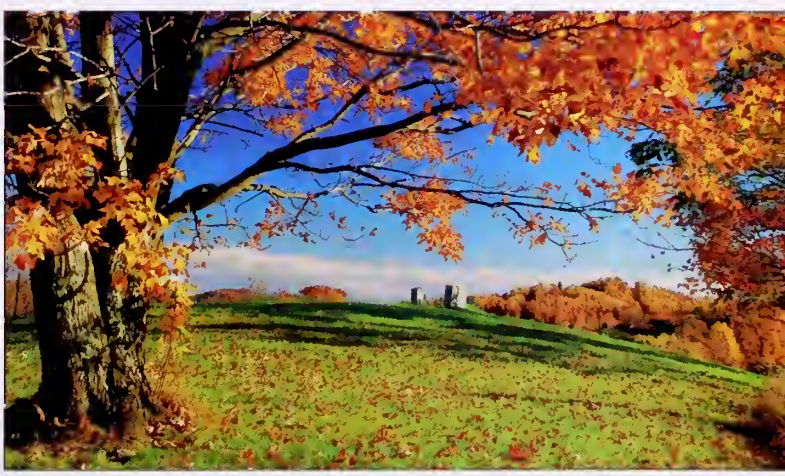
essay and photos ◆ by Wayne Riner

Despite the years and various methods of coal mining and, more recently, gas drilling and pipelines, there remains a beauty to the high ridges of our mountains. The reclamation of new and old strip mines has provided open areas planted in trees, grasses, and clover used by wildlife. Consequently, deer, bear, and turkey have returned to this part of the Appalachians where they had not been seen for many years. These animals may have repopulated the hollers and mountaintops without the assistance of the reclamation work required by the government, but more than likely it certainly helped. The past damage to the landscape will never be erased, but I look for beauty and photograph it from my vantage point on top of the mountain.

Photographers know there is a magical time each morning and evening to capture images of nature, times in which light conditions produce the very best shots. Morning and evening light is reflected through the atmosphere and clouds to create soft colors, which gives the scene a pleasing appearance. I always carry a camera with me to take advantage of those special moments when the color is just right.

Wherever we are, we should look for beauty in our surroundings. When outdoors, pause to look and listen.

Splendor



DECOYS

AS INVESTMENT

by Clarke C. Jones

Chesser decoys ©Trischa Jones

Fatigue clouds animal instinct as well as human judgment, but the old mallard should have known better. Weary from persistent, buffeting winds this wintry day in 1913, he brought his flock closer to the decoys gathered below him. Floating peacefully as they preened and fed, the wooden conspirators encouraged any flock of ducks in the area to drop into the leeward cove. Many of the decoys had been carved by the hunter himself, but a few were strays which had broken free in some storm and had drifted into the marshes and spits where he hunted. The man thought himself lucky to have a few hollow decoys made by some "fella" near Chincoteague. These were not intricately detailed, feathered decoys. To most people, they appeared to be crudely carved blocks of wood. But it was not important how these decoys looked to most people; it was what they looked like to ducks. They seemed to float better, which meant more realistically. A better floating decoy was a better tool, and that's all a decoy was to him and anyone else who made a living out of gunning waterfowl.

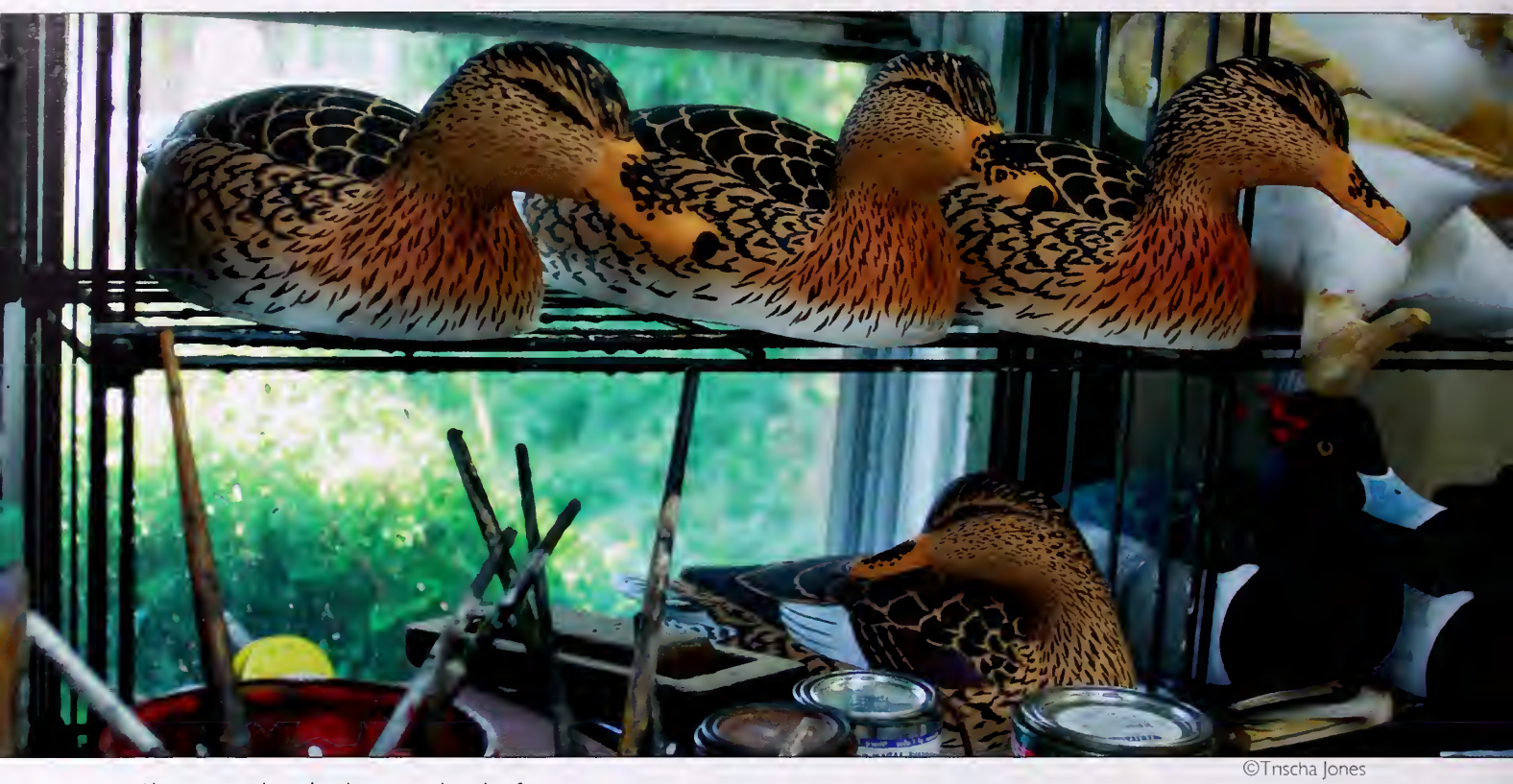
A feeding chatter seductively called from one of the false ducks below, negating whatever hesitancy the lead mallard may have had. As the flock cupped their wings and dropped their feet for a landing, the roar of a ten gauge exploded from the reeds, thus eliminating the drake and two of his companions from the possibility of ever making a future instinctive mistake.

The old waterman gathered a few of his wooden decoys and their victims into his small boat. Most of the rig of 60 or so blocks he would leave behind, for he would return later that day if the wind was right and the chop not too bad. He rowed the mile and a half to his shack through the spitting sleet, which now began to cling to the weather-cracked oars and his old oilskin coat. Thirty ducks was not a bad haul for a morning's work. Although ducks paid meagerly for the hard and often dangerous profession of a market gunner, there would be food for his family. However, most of his labors would wind up in the fancy restaurants of Baltimore and New York City.

The waterfowler docked his small boat, gathered his gun, and headed toward the warmth of his small cabin, leaving the remaining small wooden statues in his boat to fend for themselves in the freezing rain. Little did this waterman suspect that nearly 75 years later, just one of these hand-carved tools would sell for far more money than he could have dreamed.

* * * *

goldeneye and decoys ©Spike Knott



©Trischa Jones

Above, a peek at the decoys and tools of the trade of carver Grayson Chesser. Below, an award-winning gadwall drake made of foam covered in burlap, carved by William Bruce.

With the advent of the industrial revolution, American prosperity increased and tastes began to change. Duck and oyster dishes became popular table fare north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Eastern Shore watermen and duck hunters did much to supply that demand. A well-carved decoy aided the duck hunter and such carvers as Dave "Umbrella" Watson, Ira Hudson, and Nathan Cobb were some of the finest carvers around.

In order to protect waterfowl from extinction, however, the Migratory Bird Treaty was passed in 1918 and the careers of market gunners ended, thereby reducing the need for hand-carved decoys. By the end of World War II, development of plastics made wooden decoys obsolete. Duck hunting was now a sport and not a business, and plastic decoys were much cheaper and easier to take hunting.

As a result, hand-carved wooden decoys sat for decades in attics and sheds or, sadly, were used for kindling. They became scarce, rare, unwanted, and forgotten until the art world was awakened to their value in the early 1970s. Dr. James McCleery, who later was considered one of America's premier decoy collectors, plopped down $10,500 for *one* decoy at an auction in 1972. With the median family income being slightly over $13,500 at the time, paying such a price for a piece of wood was unheard of.

"Not just the general public, but experienced decoy collectors thought him crazy," recalls Joe Engers, editor and publisher of *Decoy Magazine*. The art world never again looked at old wooden decoys in the same way. Once the waterfowl decoys became considered "folk art" by those who know the value of such things, the search for them grew quickly and quietly. The old axiom of supply and demand was about to have a tremendous effect on a previously unknown market. In 2003, an Elmer Crowell pintail decoy—auctioned by Guyette & Schmidt of St. Michaels, Maryland, in conjunction with Christie's—was auctioned for approximately $801,500. Four years later the same decoy was sold by Stephen O'Brien Jr., owner of Copley Fine Art Auctions in Boston, Massachusetts, for over $1,000,000.

Past collectors of note have included singer Andy Williams and Paul Tudor Jones, the University of Virginia graduate who donated over $30,000,000 in honor of his father to build the John Paul Jones Arena at the university.

Investing Wisely

When purchasing a grand decoy that was carved by a Watson, Cobb, or Hudson, one must first do his research. A smart collector of decoys is somewhat of a scholar. He studies all aspects of a decoy: its age, the carver, and the history of both the carver and the decoy itself. Tommy O'Conner from Tidewater would certainly qualify as an astute collector

©Trischa Jones

©Trischa Jones

Above, Grayson Chesser provides details about decoy carving. Below, an original paint pintail drake by Ira Hudson, Chincoteague, circa 1910. Valued today at around $410,000.

of decoys. O'Conner began to collect decoys after he found an old wooden one in a marsh at Back Bay and became fascinated by them. That 40-year fascination has grown to him owning, at one time, close to 1,200 decoys. "I never looked at decoys as an investment first," says Tommy. "My favorite carver was Nathan Cobb, but I collect what I like and don't collect a particular decoy because of the carver or a particular bird."

When asked which contemporary Virginia decoy carvers collectors should be on the look-out for as rising stars of the future, both O'Connor and O'Brien recommend that you look at the carvings of Mark McNair and his sons of Craddocksville, and Grayson Chesser of Sanford.

Mark McNair has been carving since the early 1970s and says he has gone from selling decoys at "...informal parking lot affairs to where, over the past few years, things have evolved toward my working through some very top-notch galleries—which has been wonderful."

Although Mark is considered a top decoy carver, he is most proud of his two sons, Ian and Colin, who are talented carvers in their own right. "They come by their abilities quite naturally," says Mark. "By that I mean, they were born to this in many ways. First off, they have God-given talents. Combine that with growing up on the Chesapeake, an inherent love of nature and the outdoors, an artist's eye, and excellent manual dexterity. Add some hard work and the rest is easy."

Nationally known Virginia carver and former Eastern Shore "Ducks Unlimited Carver of the Year" Grayson Chesser carves the decoys he will hunt over. Grayson, who also collects decoys, works as a guide during waterfowl season. He started carving around 1960. "People who hunt with me want to buy my decoys after they have hunted over

©Trischa Jones

them," Grayson explains. "For many, me included, gunning over handmade decoys takes people back to a more romantic and simpler period." There is a distinction between a working decoy and a decorative decoy. Chesser describes working decoys this way. "A good decoy is like an impressionist painting. You don't have to paint feathers—you paint the illusion of feathers." Chesser further distinguishes between the two, "A good hunting decoy can be a work of art. However, a good decorative decoy may be a good work of art but not a good hunting decoy." By that he means its technical aspects—flotation and balance, for example—may be lacking.

Today, contemporary decoy carving can take many forms, from interpretive, to decorative, to working. Although wooden decoys are not used as much in duck hunting as they once were, they are still used. In Accomack County on the Eastern Shore, it is estimated that there are more decoy carvers per capita than in any other place in the country. There are at least 30 carvers who earn part of their living from carving decoys.

Jim Britton of Reedville and William Bruce of White Stone have been carving decoys for decades. Jim believes one of the advantages of making traditional hunting decoys is that you do not need to invest a fortune in power tools. "You may be able to make decoys faster with a lot of equipment," say Britton, "but that does not mean you will make them better." For Jim, tupelo is often the wood of choice for his decorative decoys, while cedar or kiln-dried white pine is used for working decoys.

Both gentlemen can be found each fall at the Rappahannock River Waterfowl Show (www.rrws.org) in White Stone, which will celebrate its 32nd year in 2011 according to Pat Bruce, William's wife. "William is the co-chair of this show. The decoy contest which occurs in conjunction with the show is one of the largest and oldest wildfowl art shows on the East Coast. The contest has all classes of carvings: gunning decoys, decorative decoys, and buoy decoys—which are made from crab pot buoys."

©Tascha Jones

Two, half-sized blue herons are in the process of creation at Jim Britton's workshop. Because herons are so wary of humans, having heron decoys around your duck blind gives other ducks/geese confidence that no people are around.

Tips for New Collectors

Whether collecting rare coins, stamps, fine wines, or any other forms of artwork, collecting hand-carved decoys can be a rewarding experience. Mark McNair offers a few suggestions to the novice collector. "Purchase Adele Earnest's' book *The Art of the Decoy*. Then read it. Although it was published in the 1970s, it's still fresh and relevant. Go to a decoy show and look around. Handle all the birds you can, especially the good ones. Resist the temptation to purchase something right away."

There are any numbers of levels for entering decoy collecting. Find a carver whose work you appreciate and start with one decoy. Recognize that you are not only collecting art, you are collecting history. And as with any collecting hobby, learning the history of the carver and the decoy can be almost as rewarding as owning the decoy itself. □

Clarke C. Jones spends his spare time with his black Labrador retriever, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit Clarke and Luke on their website at www.clarkecjones.com.

Outdoor Classics

by Beth Hester

Wendell Berry: Collected Poems 1957-1982

Originally Published by North Point Press/FSG

Available on amazon.com, and alibris.com, Powell's, and from your independent bookseller

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair of the world grows in me
and I wake in the night to the least sound
in fear of what my life, and my children's
lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the
great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

– Wendell Berry

When I began this little column in 2006, I originally brought to your attention quality outdoor classics from the golden age of outdoor writing, as well as important books from a new pantheon of hunting, fishing, and nature writers, whose works were beginning to gain recognition. Currently, I tend to focus on hot-off-the press hook and bullet titles, field guides, and reference works, and it's been awhile since I've reviewed what I'd consider to be a 'touchstone' volume from the canon of venerable outdoor literature. So this month, it seems fitting to present Wendell Berry's classic poetry collection for your winter reading pleasure.

For over 40 years, poet, essayist and novelist Wendell Berry has lived and worked with his wife, Tanya, on their farm in Port Royal, Kentucky, on land his family has maintained for generations. He has taught at numerous colleges and universities, and his work centers primarily on agrarian life, community, and the concerns of the natural world. He once stated that his life's work was largely motivated by the desire to make himself at home in the world, and in his native and chosen place. Whether he is writing about ripe raspberries, elm trees, compost, bobwhite, field mice, family, or the Milky Way, his poetry reflects these desires.

His work is infused with concerns about the responsible use of resources, land stewardship, sustainable agriculture, and the ethics of food production. Those of us who hunt, fish, tend bees, and maintain gardens will feel a kinship with what Berry means by "eating with understanding and gratitude, and with an accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes." The poetry in this volume will appeal to all lovers of wildlife and outdoor traditions who, in their daily and seasonal rounds seek, in as much as it's possible, to live in harmony with nature. Enjoy.

Let me desire and wish well the life
these trees may live when I
no longer rise in the mornings
to be pleased by the shade of them
shining, and their shadows on the ground,
and the sound of the wind in them.

– Planting Trees

TROUT STOCKING PROGRAM *ENHANCED* FOR 2011

With the Department's largest trout production facility back in operation, Virginia trout anglers will begin to experience some of the best fishing ever. As many of you know, the Department closed the Coursey Springs Fish Culture Station in 2008 for a complete restoration. Our new facility significantly increases trout production capabilities while meeting higher water quality standards.

In the past, to get as much as possible from the four other production facilities, fish were crowded during rearing and, as a result, trout were smaller than average. Now, stocked streams will not just be receiving more trout, but larger fish as well. This will continue to improve as Coursey Springs reaches full production. All waters in the stocking program will receive an increase in both the number of stockings and the amount of fish included during each event. Perhaps more significant for many anglers will be an improvement in the quality of fish coming from *all* Department facilities.

To get the most up-to-date information on the program, visit the Department's website at www.huntfishva.com and check the *Trout Fishing Guide* and the "Daily Trout Stocking Schedule." Anglers can also get daily trout stocking updates by calling (434) 525-FISH (3474). And don't forget that the first Saturday in April (April 2) is "Trout Heritage Day," when selected waters that have been closed and stocked with trout will reopen at 9:00 A.M. with a traditional opening day atmosphere. So pull out your tackle, connect with friends and family, and get out to fish for trout this spring!

©Tye Krueger

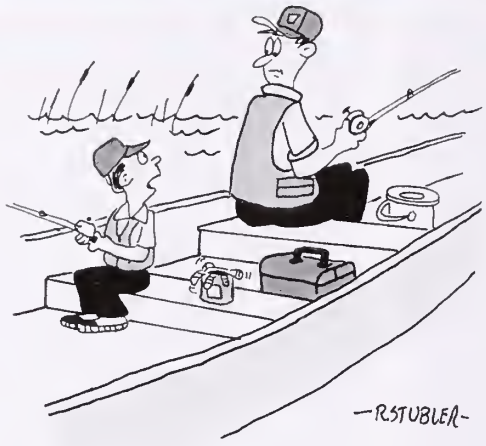
NASP

NATIONAL ARCHERY IN THE SCHOOLS PROGRAM

3rd Annual Virginia NASP State Tournament

February 26, 2011

Meadow Event Park in Doswell, VA



"Dad, how come we don't eat worms but eat the fish that eat the worms?"

The 2011 Great Backyard BIRD COUNT

Anyone can participate, from beginning bird watchers to experts. It takes as little as 15 minutes on one day, or you can count for as long as you like each day of the event. It's free, fun, and easy—and it helps the birds.

February 18–February 21

Please join us!

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IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Congratulations go to Sammy Shelton of Gretna for his lovely photograph of a male Northern cardinal taken during a snow storm in February 2010. Sammy used a Canon Rebel XT and a Canon 75-300mm lens to capture this shot.

You are invited to submit one to five of your best photographs to "Image of the Month," Virginia Wildlife Magazine, P.O. Box 11104, 4010 West Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23230-1104. Send original slides, super high-quality prints, or high-res jpeg, tiff, or raw files on a disk and include a self-addressed, stamped envelope or other shipping method for return. Also, please include any pertinent information regarding how and where you captured the image and what camera and settings you used, along with your phone number. We look forward to seeing and sharing your work with our readers.

Learn to Fly Fish at the Virginia Fly Fishing Festival

story and photos ◆ by Beau Beasley

Every April, historic downtown Waynesboro plays host to the Virginia Fly Fishing Festival, which is held on the banks of the South River and draws thousands of fly anglers from across the mid-Atlantic. The 11th annual Virginia Fly Fishing Festival will return to Waynesboro on April 16–17, 2011.

The South River tells a history all its own: It was the first urban trout fishery designated by the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF), chosen because of its abundant cold water and prime location running right through the middle of downtown. Most trout live in mountain streams; officials hoped to make trout fishing more accessible to the average angler by moving the fish closer to city dwellers. It seems only fitting that the South River also marks the birthplace of the Shenandoah Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited, the first such chapter in the state.

The festival is held under a series of tents and includes vendors ranging from fly shops, to lodges, to guides, to national tackle manufacturers like Temple Fork Outfitters, Orvis, Montana Fly Company, and Ross Reels. Corporate sponsors of the festival include Dominion, Blue Ridge Oral Surgery, and Subaru. Once admitted to the festival, attendees choose from a smorgasbord of free classes, like ladies-only casting classes, beginner seminars, and expert instruction on fly angling for everything from stripers to shad.

A number of Virginia wineries also participate and offer wine tasting to attendees (21 years and older). Several Virginia artisans and topnotch bluegrass bands enrich the festival experience. Angling parents are encouraged to bring their children with them to this family-friendly festival—and children under 16 are admitted free with a paying adult. Fly fishing legends Lefty Kreh and Bob Clouser will provide personal instruction and autograph their books.

Establishing an urban trout fishery was a good idea. Today, the re-born South River provides the backdrop for an event that has drawn thousands closer to the outdoors and instilled a passion for conservation among a new generation of anglers. For more information about the Virginia Fly Fishing Festival and a complete schedule of events, visit www.vaflyfishingfestival.org or call 703-402-8338. □

Beau Beasley is the director of the Virginia Fly Fishing Festival, www.vaflyfishingfestival.org. His new book, Fly Fishing the Mid-Atlantic, is available through his website at www.beaubeasley.com.

It was that awkward time of year that both of us hated. It was that time of year, late February, when duck season was over and the weather was still so miserable you couldn't do much outside. Ol' Jones was over at my house, sitting in my favorite chair, throwing peanut shells at the fireplace. Every now and then, a few would make it into the fire.

"I'm bored," he muttered. I looked at the small piles of peanut hulls littered about the room and said, "There is a broom in the hall closet if you are looking for something to do." Ol' Jones just ignored that comment and continued—out loud—with his thought. "I am thinking about getting a new puppy, a close-hunting quail dog. Quail season is still in and if I had a quail dog, it would add two to three weeks to my hunting schedule."

Every year, about this time, we have to play out this scenario until Jones comes out of his funk. "What kind of covey-busting pup do you envision hunting for you this year?" I asked.

Jones let that bit of sarcasm pass and said, "Frankly, I have been thinking hard about a ***Brittany***."

"A Brittany!" I exclaimed. "Now why would you want a little bobtailed, multi-colored, spaniel wanna-be from France? Do you have any idea how to speak French? You are going to look mighty silly on a quail hunt yelling, *"Viens t'asseoir! Vous êtes un chien!"* in front of your hunting buddies." Immediately, I realized that I had put Ol' Jones on the defensive. This was a poor move on my part because Jones will start defending any idea he has if he feels boxed in. Even those he really doesn't believe in himself. I could see I was in for a long-winded oratory, so I just settled in beside him and began to listen patiently.

"I have done a little research on this matter by speaking to a couple of people who really know Brittanys," Jones began. "Joe Archambeault of Lynchburg has owned, trained, trialed, and hunted Brits for over twenty years. Joe told me that 'I have owned both pointers and setters, but I prefer the Brittany breed because of its amiability, versatility, and intelligence. The Brittany is well suited for the type of bird hunting we have available to us in Virginia. They are good on grouse and typically hunt a little closer than most hunting breeds. My current Brittanys hunt hard but keep in touch.'" Ol' Jones then turned and said to me, "In other words, he hunts *with* his dogs; he doesn't have to hunt *for* them. When we are grouse hunting in the Blue Ridge, I don't need you to be on one mountain flushing a bird, while I am a mile away on another!"

I got up to go get something out of the fridge but Jones was just getting started. "I also spoke to Kathy Shannon of K Star Brittanys in Dillwyn, who got her first Brittany pup in 1979. She is an AKC Field Trial and Hunt Test judge and a UKC Field Trial judge *and* a temperament test evaluator with the ATTS!"

I started to say we could use a little temperament testing around here, but I thought better of it.

Jones continued. "Shannon also said that not only are Brits energetic hunters, they are very good at agility trials and good with an active family. In fact, Brittanys need a way to expend energy so they make a good dog for families that like to hike, jog, or hunt—although some might seem to be a little hard-headed at times."

A match made in heaven, I thought to myself. "So what should a person do if he wants one of these dynamic dogs?" I inquired.

"Kathy said that she tells people to request a pedigree, and talk to members of the Tidewater and Northern Virginia Brittany Clubs to find out about a particular litter. As in any investment, do some homework," replied Jones.

"One more thing," opined Ol' Jones. "The Brittany is a continental breed. It wouldn't hurt to have a little more class around this place!"

I'd had enough of this for one day.

"Listen," I announced as steadily as I could. "I have a great number of FC/AFC, NAFC/NFTC, GMHR, and an English SH CH in my pedigree. How many do you have in yours?"

Jones started to say something, but thought better of it.

Garder une longueur d'avance,
Luke

Luke is a black Labrador retriever who spends his spare time hunting up good stories with his best friend, Clarke C. Jones. You can contact Luke and Clarke at www.clarkecjones.com.

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A Really Good Tripod

A really good tripod will open up your photographic world. It allows you to shoot longer exposures and sharper images than those you could ever hand hold. So, what should you look for in a really good tripod? Here are a few tips.

A tripod is comprised of two main parts: the legs (which include a center column) and a head. Ideally, tripod legs should extend to your full height. Some sellers will tell you that a particular tripod extends to 70" (or whatever) but… buyer beware! What they may be including in that measurement is the extension of the center post. Be sure to clarify this before buying. A center post will raise your camera higher, but what you gain in height you will lose in stability.

The most important feature to check is leg stability. If you fully extend the tripod legs, what happens when you press down? Could a strong wind move it during a long exposure? Since creating stability is the fundamental point of a tripod, make sure you get legs that are rock solid!

How you shorten and lengthen the legs is also something to consider. You have two choices: hinged levers or collared locks. When in the field, I prefer the collars since the clips tend to catch on things or break off.

Do you want to shoot at ground level? If so, make sure the legs can extend out horizontally. You will need a shorter center column for low level shooting, but that can be purchased separately.

Tripod legs are made out of various materials such as wood, aluminum alloy, basalt, magnesium, or carbon fiber. Strong, lightweight materials such as carbon fiber are very expensive but if weight is an issue, seriously consider high-tech materials. Remember, tripod legs can last you a lifetime.

Two tripod head types are available: the ball and the pan-tilt head. I find that a ball head is best for me. A ball head will smoothly follow a subject both horizontally and vertically and, basically, you only have one knob to turn. Pan-tilt heads have numerous adjustments and levers, making them slow to use.

Another important feature to consider is how the camera or lens attaches to the head. I prefer a quick release plate that slides back and forth in the grooves of the head. Having the ability to slide your plate back and forth, as opposed to clamping it into one place, allows you much more flexibility. This is particularly important if you are using a true macro lens where you focus by moving the lens back and forth.

If you want to open up your photographic world to a lifetime of longer exposures and sharper images, consider getting a really good tripod. □

This Kirk BH-3 ball head (left) and a pan-tilt head (right) show the difference between the two head types. The ball head is very easy and quick to use. I find the pan-tilt head to be cumbersome, with a long lever that always seems to get in the way!
Photos by © Lynda Richardson.

Dining In

By Ken and Maria Perrotte

Super Bowl Party Fare

No matter which teams are playing in the big game on Super Bowl Sunday, the event offers an excuse to eat well. The thing about most "big game" table fare is that few chefs want to be cooking close to kickoff. Here are a few Super Bowl party pleasers that can be prepped the day before and then packaged for easy plate assembly just prior to the coin toss. Heads or tails? Doesn't matter when you're munching these super snacks.

Ken's Apple Smoked Venison Sandwich

Thinly sliced smoked venison roast
Sliced tomatoes
Sliced and peeled cucumber
Sliced red onion
Sliced cheeses
Toasted and sliced French or Italian bread
Sauce (mixture of about ¾ mayonnaise and ¼ horseradish, to your taste)

Pickles and kettle chips nicely round out the plate.

Smoked Fish Sandwich

Fillets of smoked fish
Sliced tomatoes
Sliced and peeled cucumber
Sliced red onion
Sliced cheeses
Toasted and sliced French or Italian bread
Sauce (mixture of about 2 tbsp. mayonnaise; add lemon pepper and Old Bay or crab boil seasoning to taste, a dash at a time)

Smoke the venison and fish slowly with apple wood chips. For the meat, use a nice hindquarter round or splurge with a backstrap. For the fish, make sure you have at least a fillet that's a half-inch thick or a little more. You can smoke the meats and fish a day ahead of the game if desired, but game day morning is best.

When ready to serve, thinly slice the venison roast across the grain. Slice onions and tomatoes. Peel and slice cucumbers. Slice a variety of cheeses. Combine mayonnaise (we like Hellman's) and horseradish sauce for meat. Mix mayonnaise, lemon pepper, and Old Bay for fish.

Slice and lightly toast bread, brushing it with a light coat of butter if you use a toaster oven. Slap sauce, meat, and condiments together. Delicious!

Venison BBQ

Venison roast (about ¼ pound per serving)
Pork Boston Butt or country style ribs–about ¼ to ⅙ the amount of venison
Broth or stock to keep moist while cooking
Salt and pepper
BBQ sauce (we like KC Masterpiece Original and Sweet Baby Rays)

Season the meat very lightly with salt and pepper and place in roasting pan. Add enough broth to cover bottom of the pan and cover tightly with foil. A Dutch oven can be used instead. Roast meat at 325° for several hours until it easily breaks apart with a fork. The amount of time needed will depend on the cut of meat. Keep it wet! Add broth if needed during cooking.

When done, cool and shred or chop the meat. Add BBQ sauce.

This can be made a day ahead and stored in your refrigerator in zip-lock freezer bags. Warm in microwave before serving.

Serve with buns, coleslaw, and extra sauce.

Pork is optional, but many folks like the little extra fat and flavor the pork provides.

Venison Chipotle Bean Dip

1 pound ground venison (we add 8 to 10% beef fat for this recipe)
½ pack taco seasoning (the pack seasons 1 pound for tacos, but we like a more subtle taco flavoring here)
3 tablespoons water
2 tablespoons (more or less to taste) chopped chipotle peppers in adobo sauce
2 cans (20.5 ounces) refried black beans
½ cup salsa
½ cup shredded cheese (we like to combine Monterey Jack, cheddar, and mozzarella, but several varieties of already shredded cheese combinations are available)

Brown ground meat in a skillet; add chopped onions and cook until soft. If you decide not to add any beef fat, use a tablespoon or two of olive oil to prevent sticking and promote browning. Add the seasonings and water and peppers, mixing well, and cook for another minute. Set the meat aside to cool.

Combine the beans and salsa in a large mixing bowl and add the meat mixture. Spoon into baking dish and top w/ cheese. Bake at 350° until hot and cheese has melted.

Serve with corn chips or vegetables. This will serve 8 to 10 people, but likely not for long. Better have a second half dish ready to heat up.

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